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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT517, MGLE01: SPEAKER BERRI SAYS HE'S READY TO REMOVE

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT517	2006-02-21 14:27	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Beirut

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000517

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/21/2016
TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: SPEAKER BERRI SAYS HE'S READY TO REMOVE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Nabih Berri stated that his "national dialogue conference," scheduled to run March 2-9, could seal the fate of President Lahoud, if the participating political blocs can agree on a consensus replacement. As he has throughout his career, Berri has assiduously counted the votes and has concluded that if either Amal (15 deputies) or Aoun (21 deputies) join forces with the March 14 coalition (71 deputies), it would create the two-thirds majority in parliament needed to replace Lahoud. Although Michel Aoun remains opposed to any candidate except himself, Berri indicated he is ready to commit his Amal delegates (which would create a two-thirds majority) if an acceptable replacement can be found. Berri is annoyed with the "stupid" behavior of Saad Hariri in calling for street demonstrations on March 14 to oust Lahoud, but believes such a confrontational strategy can be avoided if agreement on a replacement can be achieved -- an agreement he feels is within reach because it requires neither Aoun nor Nasrallah. End summary.

12. (U) Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri met the Ambassador and poloff on February 21 at his office in Ayn Tine in West Beirut. Amal political affairs advisor Ali Hamdan also attended the meeting. Berri indicated he would soon be leaving for Amman for a meeting of the Arab League, but would be back in Beirut well before next week's scheduled opening of his "national dialogue conference."

"I WILL COOPERATE ON ONE CONDITION"

13. (C) Following a remark on how rapidly things were changing on the political scene, Nabih Berri referred to a statement made on February 20 by the religious leader of Lebanon's Maronite community, Patriarch Boutros Sfeir. Unlike his previous stated position that street demonstrations designed to remove Lahoud would be unwise and damaging to the institution of the presidency, Sfeir had now declared that demonstrations were permissible, but "not in front of Baabda Palace" -- to avoid potentially dangerous counter-demonstrations. According to Berri, by making such a statement, the Maronite leader moved one step closer to joining a growing consensus to replace the Syrian-imposed president. When asked if the patriarch will name a candidate, Berri commented that the cleric was "too clever" to publicly declare an acceptable replacement, because if he did he would antagonize the numerous Maronite candidates not chosen. All the candidate need be, Berri continued, is "moderate" and acceptable to the country's diverse communities.

14. (C) Berri expressed frustration and annoyance that Saad Hariri, in emphasizing a March 14 deadline, had needlessly compressed the time available for a consensus solution, but even so, indicated there was a way to achieve Lahoud's removal peacefully, "if Saad is smart enough" to seize it. Berri indicated that preparations for the planned dialogue conference were moving ahead and it appeared the necessary parties would attend. As a result, the pieces were in place for consensus resolution of the situation.

15. (C) The speaker, who has previously beaten political odds by astute management of leverage, indicated there were presently two blocs that, if aligned with the 71 deputies of the March 14 coalition, could create the two-thirds majority needed to remove Lahoud and select his replacement. Acknowledging the obvious, Berri said that unless the replacement candidate was Michel Aoun, it was doubtful that the general would ally himself with the Hariri-led coalition.

¶16. (C) But unexpectedly, Berri then said he would consider taking his deputies into such an alliance on one condition: "I have to know who it (candidate) is." Berri indicated he really didn't have a preference, but wanted at all costs to avoid the dangerous political "vacuum" that would result if the president were removed without a consensus replacement. In essence, Berri's deputies would prevent a dangerous political impasse. More importantly, Hizballah, with its 14 deputies, would not be able to block a Amal/March 14

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parliamentary alliance.

¶17. (C) Similarly, Berri explained it was important to have a two-thirds parliamentary majority even if Lahoud decided (unexpectedly) to simply resign, because under Lebanon's constitution, matters such as the selection of a new president still required the presence of two-thirds of the deputies for a legal quorum. Thus, Hizballah would be unable to subvert the process simply by refusing to attend the pertinent parliament session.

¶18. (C) Even though Berri insisted "it would not be difficult," he conceded that if his "national dialogue" strategy failed and Lahoud survived past March 14 -- Saad Hariri's deadline -- there would be a crisis for the March 14 coalition, and the country, if competing street demonstrations broke out in the already tense capital. In an aside, Berri said the still-to-be-released ISF investigation of the violent Sunni demonstration on February 5 would indicate Syrian and Palestinian involvement was much less than originally stated, and that Sunni extremism was the real culprit.

¶19. (C) Berri concluded, "I accept that Lahoud must go, but in the street you can do nothing." He said that even though the timeframe was short, the scheduled March 2-9 dialogue was the only real solution to the increasing sectarian pressure. He expressed hope that once the presidential issue was resolved, Lebanon could begin to address the many pressing issues it confronted: the truth behind Hariri's assassination, implementation of UNSCR 1559, and normalizing relations with its most important neighbor, Syria.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The confidence of Berri is interesting when viewed in connection with Saad Hariri's similar frame of mind (see septel). There is the possibility that Berri and Hariri have already decided to join forces (to create the theoretically safe two-thirds parliamentary majority) that would explain their public statements and comments to this Embassy. If that is the case, it would appear they are playing with an awfully thin margin for error. But the slight, nuanced shift in the patriarch's position and the new-found independence of Berri to consider new alliances could be construed as key developments that may lead to the constitutional removal of Lahoud. In addition, it would be good news for Lebanon if Berri's suggestion that he might split from Hizballah is sincere. An Amal-Hizballah split would allow other Shia politicians to emerge, if the current Shia monolith splinters. But we are not holding our breath at this point. End comment.
FELTMAN